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The Globalization of English and the Tragedy of Dying Languages

Dr. Md Equebal Hussain
Associate Professor
University Department of English
B.R.A.B.U, Muzaffarpur
India

It's a paradox that while literary conferences/seminars in the Third World so eloquently discuss post-colonialism as the mantra of liberty from the colonial control of thought, as much as the half of the world's 7000 languages are on the verge of extinction. The alarming symptom of vanishing languages also means the loss of a significant portion of humanity's intellectual wealth. These languages not only give us 'key insights of biology, pharmacology, genetics, and navigation..... by word of mouth', but also contain records of human ingenuity – epics, myths, rituals – that celebrate and interpret our existence.' This paper seeks to explore this phenomenon and argue why we need to rescue these dying languages.

One of the greatest casualties of globalization is the loss of some of the world's more obscure languages. Dialects and regional languages are becoming more marginalized as they succumb to languages such as English that wield greater perceived social, economic and practical value. While today there are almost two billion people learning English and more bilingual individuals than ever before, the globalization of languages means that there's even less motivation for English speakers to learn a second language. Of late a decline in foreign language learning has been noticed in the U.S. and Great Britain.

According to one report by Linguistic Society of America, around 7000 separate languages were spoken in the world in 1996. Of these, 1000 were spoken in the Americas, 2011 in Africa, 225 in Europe, 2165 in Asia, and 1320 in the Pacific including Australia. Therefore, the earth's population of around seven billion people speaks roughly 7000 languages, a statistics that would seem to offer each language one million speakers, if things were equitable. Contrarily, seventy-eight percent of the world's population speaks the 85 largest

languages, while the 3500 smallest languages share a mere 8.25 million speakers. Thus while English has 328 million first-language speakers, and Mandarin 845 million, Tuvan speakers in Russia number just 235,000. Within the next century, linguists think, nearly half of the world's current stock of languages may disappear. More than a thousand are listed as critically or severely endangered – teetering on the edge of oblivion.

Some linguists believe the number may decrease by half; some say the total could fall to mere hundreds as the majority of the world's languages – most spoken by a few thousand people or less – give way to languages like English, Spanish, Portugese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili and Hindi. By some estimates, 90% of the world's languages may vanish within the next century (www.linguisticsociety.org). Another report of UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme estimates that "if nothing is done, half of the over 6,000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century" (www.unesco.org/culture.....). UNESCO has classified these dying languages into categories like *safe(57%), vulnerable(10%), definitely endangered(11%), severely endangered(9%), critically endangered(10%) & extinct(4%).*(ibid)

As we all know the last speaker of the great Andamenese language in the Andamans passed away last year which highlights the fact that half of the world's 7,000 languages are in danger of disappearing. There are several others in the cue. The case of Johnny Hill, the last speaker of Chemehuevi (tribe of Arizona) speaks of the tragedy of these dying languages. He finds himself linguistically isolated, "I have to talk to myself..... There's nobody left to talk to, all the elders have passed on, so I talk to myself..... that's just how it is." (http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk) As the BBC report further says, Johnny has been seriously trying to teach his children and others in the tribe. "Trouble is," he sighs, "they say they want to learn it, but when it comes time to do the work, nobody comes around." (ibid)

There are countless such cases. For instance, there were only five remaining speakers of *Osage* language in America several years ago which means there may not be anyone left now. A number of languages face the danger of disappearing from the Russian Federation, which has been home to dozens of ethnic languages. In Chechnya a large chunk of school aged children were left without an effective education on account of militant movement there, and they are now unable to write, and even to speak, in their own language. UNESCO has on its site complete list of known endangered languages all over the world. In India alone there are around two hundred such dying languages. UNESCO distinguishes four levels of

endangerment in languages, based on intergenerational transfer: Vulnerable, Definitely endangered, Severely endangered & Critically endangered. (Wikipedia)

Although majority of these languages are unwritten and undocumented, there are hundreds of other languages which are also getting marginalised especially since colonial era and more recently since 1990s when globalization gave rise to a new kind of colonialism. Therefore, as UNESCO statement says, 'With the disappearance of these languages, humanity would lose not only an irreplaceable cultural heritage but also valuable ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages' (www.unesco.org/culture.....).

In an increasingly globalized, connected, homogenized age, languages spoken in remote places are no longer protected by national borders or natural boundaries from the languages that dominate world communication and commerce. The reach of Mandarin, English, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Hindi extends seemingly to every hamlet, where they compete with languages like Tuvan and Yanomami and Altaic in a house-to-house battle. Parents in tribal villages often encourage their children to move away from the insular language of their forbears and toward languages that will permit greater education and better success.

Some scholars do not believe that dominant languages kill the weak ones. The domination of one language by another cannot be correctly described as one language killing other, they argue. "What actually kills languages is the choices of the speakers. It is the choices and preferences for particular languages made by speakers based on some factors that lead to the domination and or death of some languages." (http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/1-3/1-3) Therefore, some cynics argue that when nobody speaks a language it has no purpose. They ridicule any effort at revitalizing these languages. Either they should speak that language or, they should let them die. There are yet others who are knave enough to argue that humanity needs to be united and hence, we should adopt the formula of 'one world, one people, one common language, one common goal'. While one cannot deny the need of a single state language as a means of unification, it is also important to preserve ethnic languages alongside it, so that the folklore, culture, centuries of philosophy and traditions are not lost. Nevertheless, as linguists recognize the magnitude of the modern language die-off and rush to catalogue and decipher the most vulnerable tongues, they are confronting such underlying questions about the languages' worth and utility which beg logical answer. Does each language have boxed up within it some irreplaceable beneficial knowledge? Are these aspects of cultures that won't survive if they are translated into a dominant language? What unexpected insights are being lost to the world with the collapse of its linguistic variety?

As a matter of fact, when a language dies, knowledge goes with it. Just like losing information on how a computer file is interpreted, the data is lost to you. Moreover, languages also provide a historical identity and can provide different perspectives to important events, often the losers' point of view. As linguist K David Harrison says, "...they (the last speakers of the dying languages) tell how their ancestors calculated accurately the passing of seasons without clocks or calendars. How humans adapted to hostile environments, from the Arctic to Amazonia. We imagine eureka moments taking place in modern laboratories or classical civilizations. But key insights of biology, pharmacology, genetics, and navigation arose and persisted solely by word of mouth, in small, unwritten tongues. Finally, this web of knowledge contains feats of human ingenuity – epics, myths, rituals – that celebrate and interpret our existence."(http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/nnpapps...)

Harrison further remarks, "All cultures encode their genius in verbal monuments.... Species and ecosystems unknown to science are well-known to local people, whose languages encode not only names for things, but also complex interrelations among them..... Packaged in ways that resist direct translation, this knowledge dissipates when people shift to speaking global tongues. What the Kallawaya of Bolivia know about medicinal plants, how the Yupik of Alaska name 99 distinct sea ice formations, how the Tofa of Siberia classify reindeer. Entire domains of ancient knowledge, only scantily documented, are rapidly eroding" (ibid). Moreover, languages can provide passageways into histories, value systems and patterns of behaviour, and many of the currently endangered languages remain unstudied. Languages provide key insights into their culture's history and development. They can provide access to ideas and value-sets we would otherwise be unfamiliar with. We must also keep in mind that 'the rules and grammars of every language tell us something unique about how the mind works. When we lose a language we forever lose a one-off world view. When we lose a vocabulary we lose access to a treasure trove of meanings that help explain the world around us. This can affect all of us. For example, the world of medicine potentially suffers when we no longer understand the healing properties of natural plants and minerals found in South American rain forests of Indonesian jungles (ibid).'

Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that when we lose a language we lose a part of our common humanity. We lose an aspect of our ability to conceptualise. It's like what happens when an individual loses a part of their brain or an eye. The human journey or 'progress' requires the widest possible field of vision. It's a sorry sight to see that endangered languages are not protected the same way as we protect the endangered species. As the pamphlet of the

Linguistic Society of America says, "...language is a powerful symbol of a group's identity. Much of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory, and technical vocabulary to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humor, ways of speaking to children, and terms for habits, behaviours, and emotions. When a language is lost, all of this must be refashioned in the new language-with different words, sounds, and grammar- if it is to be kept at all. Frequently traditions are abruptly lost in the process and replaced by the cultural habits of the more powerful group. For these reasons, among others, it is often very important to the community itself that its language survive."(http://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-endangered-language)

It further says, "Much is lost from a scientific point of view as well when a language disappears. A people's history is passed down through its language, so when the language disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. The loss of human languages also severely limits what linguists can learn about human cognition. By studying what all of the world's languages have in common, we can find out what is and isn't possible in a human language. This in turn tells us important things about the human mind and how it is that children are able to learn a complex system like language so quickly and easily. The fewer languages there are to study, the less we will be able to learn about the human mind."(ibid)

In strict sense of the term, an endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future generally because it has few surviving speakers. If it loses all of its native speakers, it becomes an extinct language. As Anthony C. Woodbury points out, many languages are failing out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation, such as English in the U.S. or Spanish in Mexico. Unless current trends are reversed, these endangered languages will become extinct within the next century. Many other languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers (www.linguisticsociety.org).

In the same article, Woodbury points out the factors which contribute to the demise of languages. Thus he says, "Outright genocide is one cause of language extinction. For example, when European invaders exterminated the Tasmanians in the early 19th century, an unknown number of languages died as well. Far more often, however, languages become extinct when a community finds itself under pressure to integrate with a larger or more powerful group. Sometimes the people learn the outsiders' language in addition to their own;

this has happened in Greenland, a territory of Denmark, where Kalaallisut is learned alongside Danish. But often the community is pressured to give up its language and even its ethnic and cultural identity. This has been the case for the ethnic Kurds in Turkey, who are forbidden by law to print or formally teach their language. It has also been the case for younger speakers of Native American languages, who, as recently as the 1960s were punished for speaking their native language at boarding schools (ibid)."

According to Woodbury, "although the endangered languages are spoken by minority communities, these communities account for most of the world's languages. They include the tribes of Papua New Guinea, who alone speak as many as 900 languages; aboriginal peoples of Australia, over 80% of whose native languages will die with the current generation; the native peoples of Americas, who still retain 90% or so of their languages; the national and tribal minorities of Africa, Asia, and Oceania, speaking several thousand more languages; and marginalised European peoples such as the Irish, the Frisians, the Provencal, and the Basques." (ibid)

Firstly, it was colonialism that destroyed the native languages and now it is globalisation, the new shape of colonialism which is posing serious threat even to those languages which are not in the category of endangered languages. "Mass globalization seems to be the major culprit towards losing our individuality as multi-national corporations force their products (and language) onto other countries. Now economic importance seems to have become more important than our heritage and traditions (bbc.co.uk)." Indeed people from around the world are too busy in money minting than making any sincere effort to preserve their old golden heritage of ancient languages. This is especially true in India where most people live dreaming the American dream least bothered about protecting their native languages. Then, there is another very significant factor behind this tragic trend of dying languages. A language starts dying the moment its significance in the economic aspect of its user society starts shrinking in favour of another language (which is English in our time). Hence, language revitalization will not be effective unless there is some connection of the language with some kind of economic benefit. These days, apparently, everyone is running for English not because English is the language of the angels or the language of the demons but because it is the language of economy or, the language of superpowers.

The point I wish to make is that the Postcolonial voices should also take up the case of endangered languages on priority basis. Surprisingly unlike Wa'Thiongo who altogether stopped writing in English, the Empire-writes-back generation of our authors thrive on

English even though they nativise it. Then after pushing the native languages on back foot there is also an effort to destroy native literatures in the garb of World Literatures which is being popularised as an effort to bring nations, communities and peoples together. As for globalisation there is feeble chance of its reversal unless the entire Third world unites to challenge this completely imbalanced system which is creating two countries in one country what Adiga describes in terms of Light & Darkness. Globalization is nothing but an attempt to establish complete cultural, economic, political and military hegemony over the Third World. UNESCO which sheds crocodile tears on dying languages itself is one of the Devil's Disciples and I don't see its symbolic initiatives like declaring February 21 as "International Mother Tongue Day" and the year 2008 as the "International Year of Languages" as more than an eye-wash and a ploy to neutralise our anxiety about our native languages which are yet not enlisted under endangered languages but struggle for survival.

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